



A tale of booze, pills and pork

If only people appreciated his sense of humour, Scott Walker tells Alexis Petridis, they might understand why he turned his back on pop stardom for existential angst

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In 1995, Scott Walker released an album called *Tilt*, and gave a series of interviews. Both these events were greeted with mild shock. After all, Walker had become famous precisely because he didn't release albums or give interviews. It had been 11 years since he last did either, making a solitary, halting appearance on Channel 4's *The Tube* in support of 1984's acclaimed but commercially disastrous *Climate of Hunter*. Syd Barrett aside, he had become pop's most celebrated recluse, renowned for simply vanishing at opportune moments.

In 1966, he had attempted to escape his first flush of superstardom with the Walker Brothers, the balladeering housewives' favourites, by holing up in a monastery on the Isle of Wight. He had returned as a solo artist obsessed with the mordant songs of Belgian chansonnier Jacques Brel, the archetypal tortured crooner: performing Brel's *My Death* in the unlikely environs of *The Billy Cotton Bandshow*, writing songs about transvestites and Stalinism and Ingmar Bergman films while starring in his own light entertainment series on BBC1. But then his 1969 masterpiece *Scott 4* flopped, his management forced him first into a more commercial MOR direction, then into a disastrous Walker Brothers reunion, and, as he puts it today: "I began imbibing and just went into this abyss."

Just before the making of the Walker Brothers' 1978 album *Nite Flights*, he "snapped", contributing four bizarre, compelling, experimental songs before vanishing again, this time for eight years. "I hated myself so much for all the years of bad faith," he says today. "I still do. I'm very wary of it. It bothers me that I wasted all that time, you know? I was making records to pay off bills. I'd bought a big flat and all this kind of stuff. I get so annoyed, because I should have figured out another way, but I was just very vulnerable after the fourth album. The place was crawling with ... hippies" - he pronounces the word with a delightful shudder of contempt - "and there was no way around that, if you weren't in their uniform. It was tough."

The journalists who met him in 1995 found Walker to be guarded, nervous and perhaps a little eccentric (one interviewer, who answered "yes" when Walker asked if he was hungry, found himself presented not with the expected invitation to dine with pop's foremost enigma, but a Frusili bar fished from the singer's shoulder bag), but not the irreparably damaged weirdo of popular myth. He had tamed the "imbibing" that led him to spend much of the 1970s and 1980s "sat in pubs watching guys play darts". His record label, apparently unabashed by the wilfully uncommercial musical direction unveiled on *Tilt* - industrial clanging, churning orchestrations and songs about Adolf Eichmann - pressed for a swift follow-up. One journalist felt emboldened enough to announce there would be no 11-year wait for *Tilt*'s follow up. "Scott Walker's next album," he suggested, "will be

made not in 2006, but next year."

As predictions go, this turned out to be right up there with Michael Fish telling the woman who rang the BBC there was no hurricane on the way. Exactly 11 years on, Scott Walker is sitting in his manager's living room, wearing battered Converse trainers and a baseball cap, promoting Tilt's follow-up, *The Drift*. He does this politely, but not without reservations. "Am I nearing the end of the promotional campaign? I'm nearing the end of my rope," he sighs. He pleads memory loss so often when asked about his past that you begin to wonder whether it's the result of the imbibing years or just deliberate evasion. He sometimes seems completely baffled by fairly straightforward observations about his career. He complains that journalists think he's some kind of misery, which doesn't seem that unfair an assumption, given both his mythic reputation and the fact that his oeuvre is hardly a barrel of laughs: from *The Walker Brothers'* first hit *Love Her*, on which he quaveringly implored the rival waltzing off with his girl to "be the guy I couldn't be", to *The Drift*, with its hellishly rendered depictions of despots and despair, his work has almost always depicted Walker in a pronounced state of existential anguish.

He frowns: "I think people have missed the humour in my work. It's essential when you're dealing with subject matter like this that you balance it out, you know? If you're just going all one way, it becomes one of those awful arty things that everyone hates. You know, men in black shirts and that kind of thing."

His voice is deep and sonorous, and still bears an American accent 41 years after he moved to England and changed his name from Engel to Walker. It sounds like his singing voice: not the one he applies to *Tilt* and *The Drift*, which is quavering and stretched and occasionally distressing to listen to, but the gorgeous baritone that sang *Make It Easy on Yourself* or *It's Raining Today* four decades ago, when he was dubbed the *Blonde Beatle* and *The Boy with the Golden Voice*, and even the next Sinatra.

If you search the internet, you can find a clip, from 1967, of Walker performing Brel's *Matilda* on *The Dusty Springfield Show*, giving it lots of expressive hand gestures in dark glasses and perilously tight trousers. Watching it makes you think of Michael Palin's famous quote about seeing Peter Cook in his prime and wondering at the unfairness of anybody being that talented and that handsome. At 63, the toothsome good looks have weathered into a rather kindly face, but you wouldn't know it from recent photographs: whenever a camera is pointed at him Walker seems to pull a foreboding *Serious Artist* expression, brow furrowed, lips pursed. You get the feeling he might occasionally enjoy playing up to his tortured genius reputation. "I can see sometimes that people are intimidated by me," he nods. "I usually try to put people at their ease, because it makes me feel uncomfortable, but certainly if I'm faced with someone from a record company then I'll use it. I can feel myself going into that mode. All of us have multiple personalities and that particular one slots in very well in those circumstances."

He is quick to point out that he didn't disappear at all between *Tilt* and *The Drift*. He scored a film, *Pola X*, recorded a couple of songs for other soundtracks (including the Bond movie *The World Is Not Enough*) and a couple with German chanteuse Ute Lemper. He produced Pulp's final album *We Love Life* and curated the 2000 *Meltdown Festival*, which featured Blur, Radiohead and Smog - all artists under the spell of his late-1960s solo albums - and, perhaps most memorably, a hitherto-unknown German industrial act called *Fuckhead*, whose performance climaxed with two members stripping off, sticking a washing line up their bums and hanging clothes off it. "Did you see them?" he chuckles. "Oh God, it was fantastic. They're very funny. I really liked them."

Nevertheless, he concedes, *The Drift* took longer than he expected. He says wrote *Scott 4* in a matter of weeks - "I seem to remember when I was writing it things really coming on and I just couldn't

stop them" - but these days, the songs can take years to agonisingly construct: "Years ago, I was dealing in more conventional melody and stuff, you had parameters, but this is a completely different ball-game."

You can say that again. If anything, the tracks on *The Drift* seem a step further away from the mainstream into ever more dense and impenetrable realms. There are moments that make Tilt sound like the Kaiser Chiefs. *The Drift* features bursts of screaming noise and unbearably tense silences, and ruminations on 9/11, the death of Mussolini's mistress Clara Petacci and the current obsession with celebrity, of which Walker takes an unsurprisingly dim view (the suggestion that this might be in some way linked to his own unhappy brush with fame brings on one of his baffled looks: "Well, maybe it is. I've never thought of that, actually."

Elsewhere, there are wildly discordant strings, Walker asking "What's up doc?" in the voice of Daffy Duck, a donkey braying, and the authentically stomach-churning sound of someone repeatedly punching a side of pork. "I needed an undercurrent of violence and that came into my head," he explains of the latter. Had he heard someone punch a side of pork before? "No, no, I just imagined it would sound like that. I happened to be walking past a butcher's shop round where I lived and I saw this side of pork hanging there and I thought, well, that's it."

It's remarkable, and utterly unlike anything else, but music this abstruse is surely doomed to commercial failure. The enthusiasm of his former record company, so pronounced on Tilt's release, waned when they realised they would be getting more of the same in the future. Clearly, his experience in the 1970s has left Walker a strong candidate for the title of Britain's Most Uncompromising Artist. "The regime there changed about five times. The final person was absolutely shocked when they heard Tilt. He said, 'Oh yeah, we've got to arrange a meeting, I've got to meet Scott Walker, it'll be fantastic, we'll make a great record.' Of course, when this fellow heard Tilt, he said, 'There's just no way we could ever do this again.'" Walker ended up with the arty indie label 4AD, best known as the former home of the Pixies and the Cocteau Twins. "They actually wanted me to make another Tilt. I know, you look amazed and so am I, but they actually wanted it."

He says he keeps up to date with current music - "I've heard the Arctic Monkeys and all that kind of thing" - but claims to be completely uninterested in the endless reissues and continued vast influence of his own 1960s and 1970s work, to which, he says, he will never return. "I don't own any of my records," he says. Mention of 2004's *Five Easy Pieces* box set, which bravely attempted to thematically link his entire oeuvre, from the Walker Brothers to Tilt and Pola X, prompts another baffled expression. "I don't have a real curiosity that way. I don't have an objection, I don't think it's bad music or anything like that. If it's playing somewhere, I'll stop and listen to it. I'm sort of like Don Quixote, I don't want to see what's going on."

In any case, there's too much going on now to worry about the past. Another album is in the pipeline, although he's not making any rash predictions as to when. There's a documentary film being made about him and - not, it has to be said, for the first time - talk of a return to live performance, 28 years after he quit, apparently disheartened by an off-key trumpet player backing him in Birmingham cabaret club. He says he's more worried about the expense of reproducing *The Drift* live than he is about the stage fright that once plagued him. "Sure, it's still there, but it was really bad at one point. Just to get on, I'd be drinking and taking a lot of tranquilisers and I'd get out in that spotlight and I'd be sober, man! Nothing could numb it. I'd probably be alright now."

All of which raises one question: what effect has his increased profile had on his zealously guarded privacy? Is he, for example, being recognised in public again? He smiles. "No, not that often. I had a guy sit down next to me in the tube not so long ago and he said, 'I have to tell you, I'm a big fan of

yours. I bought your last two records and"" - he pauses for dramatic effect - ""I'm never going to buy one again!" And he got up and walked out. He was really pissed off."

Pop's greatest enigma lets out a hearty chuckle. "Some people," he says, drily, "take things really personally."

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